

Christmas Eve 2010
Fourth Presbyterian Church
John Buchanan

Welcome all on this Christmas Eve. Welcome members and friends of Fourth Presbyterian Church and welcome visitors. More people want to come to church on Christmas Eve than can fit in the pews. It is a nice problem to have, unless you can't sit in your favorite pew or if you're not even in the sanctuary. So a special Christmas greeting to all misplaced persons sitting in Anderson Hall watching on closed circuit and a word of gratitude for your patience and forbearance.

And a welcome to a unique category of misplaced persons, several of whom are always here on Christmas Eve, namely out-of-town Roman Catholics who were looking for Holy Name Cathedral and ended up at Fourth Presbyterian instead. We have this unique problem. We are only a few blocks apart. We are on Michigan Avenue, they are on State Street. We have a beautiful Gothic building and look a little like a Cathedral. It happens every day actually. Visitors enter our Narthex doors, cross themselves, genuflect and ask, "When is Mass?" So, on Christmas Eve there are lost Catholics who walk in, are ushered to a seat, and now surrounded, and crowded, open their bulletins and discover to their horror that they are not at Holy Name but Fourth Presbyterian. So, to you few, a special, ecumenical greeting. Be comforted in the knowledge that there are surely a few lost Presbyterians, sitting in the pews over on State Street and just discovering that they are in the wrong church. My friend, Father Dan Mayall and I agree that no permanent damage will be done.

I have an Advent reading list: old favorites I read every year. On my list is T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*. It's an accessible and simple poem compared to most of the poems Eliot wrote - and the opening lines are, I think, striking:

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter."

“Such a long journey.” It begins months earlier, with the first bright magazine ads sometime in September. On Michigan Avenue it is very serious business with the year’s profit margin dependent on Christmas sales. And the children begin to wish and dream and make lists months ahead. When I was a child the arrival of the Sears Roebuck Catalog in the mail one day in the fall set weeks of dreaming, list making, hoping. The pace quickens at Thanksgiving, and for these past four weeks most of us have been very busy trying to accomplish all we need to accomplish. For some it can be almost oppressive. I love the anecdote related to me by one of our Sunday School teachers. Her six year olds were learning about the ways the church gets itself ready for Christmas. “We have a special name for the season,” she explained. “Does anyone know what we call the four weeks before Christmas?” A bright little girl put her hand up and said, “I know. It’s called Advil.”

Sometimes that seems about right. We do stretch ourselves thin preparing for this and now it is here, and all that remains is to hear and think about the story and the reason we do all of it. The whole world becomes silent tonight, to listen again to the story, to hear again the angel’s song, the lowing of the cattle, the baby’s first cry.

There is something in us that wants to be part of this story, to be in the story. Renaissance painters portrayed the holy family and newborn child in a stable set in their own town not in the 1st Century Bethlehem – but 14th Century Florence, surrounded by familiar buildings. Sometimes they painted townspeople, friends, in the picture. Sometimes they painted themselves into it.

And for centuries, Christian people have been recreating the nativity in songs and carols and annual Christmas pageants, like the wonderful one held here at 4:00, with a donkey and camel lumbering down the center aisle and lots of sheep and shepherds and angels and Wise men and lots of singing – “Gloria, Gloria in Excelsis Deo.” A little boy in front of me whispered to her father loud enough for people around to hear – “Who’s Gloria?” – and by means of the crèches, the Bethlehem manger, Mary and Joseph, cattle and shepherds and sheep, finely carved wood or sculpted marble, or dollar store plastic.

It was Francis of Assisi who first created a live nativity in 1223 in a humble outdoor setting and people loved it, came from miles around to see it. Art

historians are interested in Francis because before he assembled his live nativity, with a real infant as Baby Jesus, the Christ child in pre-Renaissance paintings of the Nativity is portrayed as a miniature adult, sitting upright, almost regally surveying his kingdom. Francis reminded his neighbors that Jesus was born like every baby, and was as weak and helpless and vulnerable and dependent on his mother and father's love as any human infant. Francis remembered and reminded his neighbors and ultimately the whole world that the essence of Christmas is that God came to earth - to be with us, to be as vulnerable and weak as any of us; came to earth to share and bless our humanness, all of it: our joys, our sadness, our ecstasy, our disappointment; came to be with us and redeem and make whole our humanness, our suffering, our victories, our fears, our deaths.

By being here this evening, you and I are saying that we want to come close to the story, hear it again, ponder it in silence and candlelight, and be part of it somehow, paint ourselves into this picture.

It's such a simple story about human life at its most human -

A man and young woman -she heavy with child-travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, a small village near Jerusalem, the ancestral home of the man's family. There is a census and they have traveled under imperial decree to be registered. It is a long and difficult journey. He walks, she rides the donkey. If they find an inn at the end of the day, they have food and shelter. If not, they stop by the side of the road and sleep under the stars. Finally they arrive in Bethlehem. The inn is already full. The innkeeper allows them to spend the night out back in the cow stall. At least they will be warm. During the night the time comes. Labor begins. He helps, she births her baby, a son, and together they wrap him in the strips of clean cloth they have brought along, and after she nurses him and they both cradle him - and each other - in their arms, they place him in the feed box, a manger, to sleep.

It is a beautifully simple story about human life at its most human.

The glory of this story - and the reason countless millions of people around the world are pausing to hear it again, even though they have heard it hundreds of times and know every detail by heart - the glory of it, and the reason you and I have come here this evening, is that it is a story about God. God coming into the world: God revealed in a human life. God living

among us; God revealed as he was born and lived, and worked and laughed and loved: God revealed as he taught and healed and challenged religious convention: God revealed as he reached out to touch the lives of all: his best friends, their families; lawyers and priests, poor and oppressed, outcast and marginalized. God revealed in that man's honest, strong, unconditional love: God revealed as he suffered and died.

The Christmas story is about a God who reigns not from a magnificent throne in a far off corner of heaven, but from a stable in Bethlehem, a cross on Calvary, a table where bread was broken and wine shared and where all were welcome.

God comes that close to us. And one thing further. A generation after he lived, one of his followers, thinking about him and what he did and what it all meant, an old man, I think, with most of his life behind him, wrote these words:

“In him was life and the life was the light of all people . . . The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

There is plenty of darkness:

- the darkness when we're afraid, worried about our nation and the world and the future, worried about our young people fighting two wars and resolution and peace seem so remote -
- the darkness when you are about to lose your job and nothing is going right, when your children are in trouble
- the darkness of sickness and aging

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.”

The love of God has been born among us and nothing can or will, ever, separate us from that love.

Good friends, as you light a small candle and watch as it sputters and then flames and miraculously joins the light of the people sitting around you and slowly, surely, fills this space with light, remember -

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light.”

Make a place in your heart for that light this evening. Keep it burning tomorrow, and the next day and all the days ahead.

Amen